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America's Best Elementary Schools

If you want your child to have a love of learning that lasts a lifetime, there's no substitute for the right start. Here, education experts rate the 177 top schools and share the secrets of their success. **BY MICHAEL J. WEISS**

Three years ago, Craycroft Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona, was an example of everything wrong with public schools. Each day, nearly 15 percent of its 350 students missed class. Homework was ignored and standardized test scores were among the area's worst.

Then Craycroft, whose student population is about half white and half Hispanic, urged parents to get more involved. The results: Classroom volunteers jumped from 7 to 150. PTO members made house calls to other parents to help tutor their children. With equipment contributed by local businesses, parents helped set up a computer lab and science center.

Today Craycroft is an educational showcase. Some 60 percent of its graduating fifth graders score higher than the national norm on standardized tests. Attendance is 97 percent. Principal Franklin Narducci credits the fact that children learn best when adults show they care about school for the dramatic turnaround.

Success stories like Craycroft's may seem like the exception rather than the rule. But the untold story of American education is that many of the nation's 59,015 elementaries *are* succeeding.

Indeed, in our annual America's Best Schools project, we found 177 public elementaries worthy of honor, includ-

Making a splash in ecology, fifth graders at School No. 29 in Yonkers, New York, get hands-on lessons in sea life.



ing rich and poor schools, inner city and suburban schools, schools with 200 students and those with more than 1,300. What the winners all have in common is a commitment to finding the best ways to meet the needs of today's young students. They know that a child's first school experiences set the stage for lifelong learning.

But because there's no agreement on how to create the perfect school, the best ones devote an impressive amount of time to experimenting with an array of programs to enhance learning. Such grass roots reforms are steadily changing the way we educate our children:

•**No more rote learning.** Gone is the back-to-basics revival of the eighties with its emphasis on memorization. Educators no longer think kids' heads

should just be stuffed full of facts. Instead, the goal is to make pupils independent thinkers. "Kids don't learn much when they're faced with passive activities," says Henry Levin, Ph.D., a Stanford University professor whose Accelerated Schools Project has been adopted by more than 325 schools. Rather than assign fill-in-the-blank work sheets, for instance, teachers at Daniel Webster Accelerated School in San Francisco may ask third-grade students to critique *Charlotte's Web* or fourth graders to analyze *The Cosby Show*. •**Derailing "tracking."** Although tracking—the practice of grouping children by ability—is still used in about 60 percent of U.S. elementary schools, it's losing favor. Although it may be efficient to move (continued on page 54)

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like-minded pupils along in unison, often only the smartest students—who get all the educational goodies—profit. At the low end, classes look more like the *Sweathogs* from the old sitcom *Welcome Back, Kotter*. And a growing number of researchers say that tracking is self-fulfilling: As disadvantaged kids fall years behind their grade levels, they grow to dislike school. Better, they say, to mix children at different levels in the same classroom. They cite studies showing that such classes increase everyone's achievement, including gifted students who help tutor their classmates.

•**Growing the school year.** At 178

AMERICA'S BEST SCHOOLS

days, American kids have one of the shortest school years among industrialized nations.

Japanese youngsters, by contrast, go to school for 210 days.

The number of year-round schools is rising, albeit slowly:

2,017 public schools have now abolished long summer vacations, substituting shorter breaks throughout the year. (Though many educators know year-round schools could close the performance gap, cost is the major obstacle. An estimated \$1 billion is needed for every extra day spent teaching the nation's 42.25 million public-school children.)

•**Helping the urban poor.** A growing number of schools are making an effort to reach disadvantaged students.

"Many kids under economic and social stress need special services," says James Comer, M.D., a psychiatrist and director of the Yale University Child Study Center School Development Program. "But most of all, they need an attitude that says, You can succeed." A Dr. Comer-designed program that strives to build an active partnership between parents, teachers, and social workers has been adopted at some 250 schools.

If one lesson is clear, it's that schools must change as our society does. By constantly revitalizing themselves, our 177 winners are *leading* the way to sparking excellence in *all* schools. □

Michael J. Weiss is Redbook's America's Best Schools project director.

Does your school make the grade?

Review the following qualities shared by our winners to see if your school measures up.

INVOLVED PARENTS Winning schools find creative ways to include busy parents in their children's education.

At Boston's Mather Elementary, principal M. Kim Marshall sends parents a weekly one-page guide about their kids' schoolwork. At George Washington Carver Elementary School in San Francisco, parents can drop by at their convenience, and take math and reading workshops so they can better tutor their kids. In many top schools, 90 percent of the parents volunteer their time.

A COMMITTED PRINCIPAL Principals of the best schools are determined and caring, and dedicated to children above and beyond the call. At Baltimore's Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Elementary School, principal Deborah Wortham goes door-to-door to introduce herself to parents. R. Karen Craig, the principal at Naches Valley Primary in Yakima, Washington, shares a cafeteria lunch with a different child each day until, by year's end, she's met every pupil.

NURTURING TEACHERS Outstanding teachers are not only qualified in their craft, they also respect the different ways kids learn, and are dedicated to having all students do their best. At Union Elementary School in Montpelier, Vermont, students who need extra nurturing are often taught by the same teacher for two or three years. At Westridge

Elementary in Raytown, Missouri, teams of teachers identify students with academic or emotional problems and then assign a "care teacher" to provide daily encouragement.

AN EMPHASIS ON THE WRITTEN WORD Instead of work sheets and *Dick and Jane* readers, these schools offer a "whole language" approach, meaning kids write at every opportunity and work at developing speaking skills. At Dutch Fork Elementary in Irmo, South Carolina, an in-school mail system encourages younger students to write to their teachers and each other. At the best schools, keeping a journal is as common as carrying a lunchbox.

HANDS-ON LEARNING Experts estimate that 75 percent of all children learn faster and retain more through real-world experiences. Top elementaries feature nature trails, environmental labs, and simulated communities. At E. F. Swinney Applied Learning Magnet in Kansas City, Missouri, students plant gardens and publish their own newspapers. Sixth graders at Mountain Brook Elementary School in Birmingham, Alabama, observe a trial at a county courthouse and then invite a local judge to preside over a mock student trial.

INNOVATIVE USE OF TECHNOLOGY Until recently, high technology at most elementary schools meant an overhead projector and some shared VCRs. But at leading schools such as Floranada Elementary School in

Fort Lauderdale, Florida, pupils produce a closed-circuit television program every morning. Many of the nation's best schools fully integrate computers into daily learning by first grade; some even allow students to borrow computers like library books.

ALTERNATIVE ASSESSMENTS Progressive elementary schools know that success can't be measured by standardized multiple-choice tests alone. At New Suncook School in Lovell, Maine, teachers evaluate their students through written reports, oral presentations, and group projects. And students contribute a journal entry and a written self-portrait as part of their assessments. **SUPPORTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT** The finest elementaries thrive because they create a climate of high expectations. Dr. Lawrence A. Nixon Elementary in El Paso, Texas, treats all of its 425 students as gifted, providing them with an accelerated curriculum that features laser-disc science equipment. Exemplary schools reward student success—no matter the arena—with bulletin board displays, awards assemblies, and positive letters home.

COMMUNITY ALLIANCES Besides the usual visits by local police and fire chiefs, top schools enjoy presentations by business leaders, writers, college professors, and artists. They take students on field trips to see how offices and factories work as well as attend concerts and other cultural events.

—M.J.W.

Best of the States

Our blue-ribbon panel of education experts judged these 51 schools (one from each state and the District of Columbia) to be among America's top public elementaries. The secret to their success? They combine innovative curricula, compassionate teachers, impressive test scores, and an uncompromising commitment to excellence.



STATE	SCHOOL	CITY	
AL	Cahaba Heights Community School	Birmingham	This suburban school for 850 prides itself on involved parents (1,520 belong to the PTO) and an innovative curriculum: Students keep journals, correspond with foreign pen pals, and publish a school newspaper.
AK	Susitna	Anchorage	To encourage students to become self-directed, Susitna's 600 pupils set their own academic goals, develop plans to achieve them, and lead conferences with their parents and teachers to evaluate their progress.
AZ	Craycroft	Tucson	This once-troubled school has become a source of state pride by providing its 365 students with unusual learning settings, including a biosphere, desert trail, First Interstate Banking/Math Lab, and Kids' Kitchen; parents can take classes in math, science, computers, and parenting skills.
AR	George Washington Carver Magnet	Little Rock	The state's first elementary math-and-science magnet offers its 603 students a superior curriculum, including a weekly astronomy class. One third of the students are gifted, and 90 percent excel in higher-order thinking skills.
CA	Rooftop Alternative School	San Francisco	Rooftop's 339 students achieve impressive results, thanks to award-winning teachers and community consultants who specialize in art, architecture, and science.
CO	Nederland	Nederland	This rural school has pioneered a groundbreaking space curriculum with hands-on lessons in math, science, and computer technology. To simulate solar-powered space research, students even grow hydroponic plants within a geodesic dome.
CT	Columbus Magnet School	South Norwalk	This exemplary inner-city magnet has overcome numerous urban ills by offering its 328 students high-quality programs in writing and art-appreciation as well as in space exploration and child sexual-abuse awareness.
DE	Cedar Lane	Middletown	The 414 students at this rural school are offered myriad extracurricular activities, including French and Spanish courses, music and art clubs, and a calculator team.
DC	John Eaton	Washington	A novel parent group organizes after-school tutors, funds engaging math courses, and awards faculty grants for special projects.
FL	Alimacani	Jacksonville	With 475 parents serving as classroom aides, 227 community members involved as mentors and tutors, and 31 business partners providing more than \$350,000 in supplies and equipment, this suburban school for 1,301 students thrives.
GA	I. N. Ragsdale	Atlanta	A model urban school, Ragsdale offers its 351 students an impressive array of extracurricular activities, such as a mentoring program for at-risk pupils, tutoring for classroom enrichment, rap sessions for girls, and an Honor Court to recognize achievements by all.
HI	Kapunahala	Kaneohe	Many of the 543 students at this suburban school produce a weekly telecast, <i>Inside Kapunahala</i> , that's earned state recognition for teaching language and video-production skills.
ID	Sorensen	Coeur d'Alene	Sorensen's 332 students not only help manage the school as peer mediators and student-council representatives, they also organize clubs—in art, drama, and chess—and recruit teachers and parents to act as advisers.
IL	Prescott	Chicago	Serving a poor inner-city population, Prescott has turned itself into a "community learning laboratory," providing students and parents with access to social workers, physicians, college tutors, and business mentors.
IN	IPS Key School, #97	Indianapolis	Described as a cross between a children's museum and a school, Key develops its 179 students' varied abilities through multiage classes; elective courses; daily instruction in music, art, and computers; and nontraditional grading by video presentations and art and writing portfolios.

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MONEY ISN'T EVERYTHING

Average 1991 annual expenditure per public school pupil: \$5,470.

Average spent by our Best Schools winners: \$4,282.

AMERICA'S BEST SCHOOLS

Category Winners

Our judging panel selected the following 126 schools as the best in their respective categories. The honored schools are listed alphabetically by state within each category; one school from each category is highlighted to provide a more detailed portrait of its successful formula.

OVERALL EXCELLENCE

These 72 well-rounded schools excel in many ways. They offer students a success-oriented mix of a creative curriculum and varied extracurricular activities, nurturing teachers, and supportive parent and community members.

Indian Creek Elementary, Indianapolis, Indiana
Despite only modest financial support from a socio-economically diverse community, Indian Creek Elementary still manages to excel thanks to grants, fund-raisers, and a committed faculty. The school offers its 533 students the latest learning tools—including one computer for every two students. But it's not the high-tech wizardry alone that makes this school exceptional. A six-acre outdoor nature center is a living lesson in botany. A nationally recognized artists-in-residence program teaches weaving, mime, and storytelling. And fourth- and fifth-grade students in the French Back-to-Back program take a three-week trip to France while stateside classmates interact with French exchange students. Indian Creek boasts a 98 percent attendance rate and higher than average test scores. "We

thrive because our parents and teachers want to be the best," says principal Karen Gould, Ed.D.



Youngsters at Indian Creek Elementary profit from special computer-learning labs.

Elementary School	City/State	Elementary School	City/State
Jim Pearson	Alexander City, Alabama	Midway Heights	Columbia, Missouri
Mountain Brook	Birmingham, Alabama	E. F. Swinney Applied Learning Magnet	Kansas City, Missouri
Westwood	Springdale, Arkansas	Cambridge School	Kendall Park, New Jersey
Ezequiel A. Balderas	Fresno, California	Sandyston-Walpack School	Layton, New Jersey
Glenn E. Murdock	La Mesa, California	Littleton	Morris Plains, New Jersey
Union House	Sacramento, California	Dutch Neck School	Princeton Junction, New Jersey
Daniel Webster Accelerated School	San Francisco, California	Hillrise	Las Cruces, New Mexico
Dr. George Washington Carver	San Francisco, California	Benjamin Franklin	Binghamton, New York
Killingly Central School	Dayville, Connecticut	West Frankfort	Frankfort, New York
Stratfield School	Fairfield, Connecticut	Tangier Smith	Mastic Beach, New York
Union School	Unionville, Connecticut	P.S. 75,	
Tilford W. Miller School	Wilton, Connecticut	The Emily Dickinson School	New York, New York
Clover Street School	Windsor, Connecticut	P.S. 124,	
Floranada	Fort Lauderdale, Florida	The Yung Wing Elementary School	New York, New York
Oak Hill	Jacksonville, Florida	Fox Meadow	Scarsdale, New York
Southwest	Lakeland, Florida	Wantagh	Wantagh, New York
Aikahi	Kailua, Hawaii	Barrington Road	Upper Arlington, Ohio
Grove Avenue School	Barrington, Illinois	Caledonia School	East Cleveland, Ohio
Daniel Webster School #46	Indianapolis, Indiana	Morgan	Hamilton, Ohio
Indian Creek	Indianapolis, Indiana	Alameda	Portland, Oregon
East	Pendleton, Indiana	Bradford School	Bradford, Rhode Island
Tecumseh-Harrison	Vincennes, Indiana	Buist Academy	Charleston, South Carolina
Valley Park	Overland Park, Kansas	Satchel Ford	Columbia, South Carolina
Arlington	Lexington, Kentucky	Dutch Fork	Irmo, South Carolina
Mary G. Hogsett	Danville, Kentucky	Vermillion	Vermillion, South Dakota
Millard	Pikeville, Kentucky	Tulip Grove	Hermitage, Tennessee
Audubon Montessori School	New Orleans, Louisiana	DuPont	Old Hickory, Tennessee
New Suncook School	Lovell, Maine	Ortega	Austin, Texas
Mt. Washington	Baltimore, Maryland	Stonewall Jackson	Dallas, Texas
Sanborn School	Andover, Massachusetts	Bunker Hill	Houston, Texas
Graham & Parks Alternative Public School	Cambridge, Massachusetts	Christa McAuliffe	Lewisville, Texas
Nantucket	Nantucket, Massachusetts	Huffman	Plano, Texas
Barton	Detroit, Michigan	Shepard	Plano, Texas
Blue Earth	Blue Earth, Minnesota	W. H. L. Wells	Plano, Texas
New Hope	New Hope, Minnesota	Fidalgo	Anacortes, Washington
Susan Lindgren Intermediate Center	St. Louis Park, Minnesota	Phantom Lake	Bellevue, Washington
D.T. Cox	Pontotoc, Mississippi	Milwaukee German Immersion School	Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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AMERICA'S BEST SCHOOLS

SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT

Despite a lack of resources affluent schools take for granted, these 12 schools have made significant gains in academic achievement, attendance rates, and student behavior. Their strategies are both innovative and inspirational.

Baker's Chapel Elementary, Greenville, South Carolina
For years, Baker's Chapel Elementary had a reputation for mediocrity. But with the 1983 hiring of principal Nancy

Farnsworth, everything changed. She insisted that every night the 317 students complete homework in math and reading. Each month, they had to write a book report, finish a science and social studies project, and memorize a poem. Each teacher was required to host three field trips and three outside speakers per year, as well as write one grant application annually. Today the school's curriculum, teachers, and principal have all won awards. Between 1983 and 1990, test scores in reading doubled; in mathematics, they tripled. "If you expect kids to achieve, they're going to," observes Farnsworth.

Elementary School	City/State
Liberty	Midway, Georgia
S. Ellen Jones	New Albany, Indiana
Shady Grove	Monroe, Louisiana
Samuel Coleridge-Taylor	Baltimore, Maryland
Mather	Dorchester, Massachusetts
Dag Hammarskjöld School No. 6	Rochester, New York

Elementary School	City/State
Winton Place Primary School	Cincinnati, Ohio
Pierce	Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
Baker's Chapel	Greenville, South Carolina
Whiteville	Whiteville, Tennessee
Montgomery	Farmers Branch, Texas
Tiskelwah	Charleston, West Virginia

CLASSROOM INNOVATION

Recognizing that not everyone works best in traditional learning settings, these six standout schools are honored for implementing creative and successful curriculum projects to better reach their students.

Yonkers Public School No. 29, Yonkers, New York
Nature is at the heart of the learning process at School No. 29. The school boasts a wildlife bird sanctuary, and students learn about local plants and animals at workshops taught by rangers and scientists. While many schools feature recycling programs, School No. 29 has taken its program further, integrating the environment into all subject areas. The school's three wings are divided into geographic

regions—like oceans, marshlands, and deserts—so teachers can develop thematic units for math and reading. Recently, students won a national award for a primer about recycling. "We want students to understand that ecology is a way of life," says principal Marilyn Walder, "not something on a bumper sticker."

Elementary School	City/State
Susan Roll Leach School #68	Indianapolis, Indiana
Stanton	Stanton, Kentucky
Bach Open Classroom Program	Ann Arbor, Michigan
Pierre Laclède	St. Louis, Missouri
Saco Public School	Saco, Montana
Yonkers Public School No. 29	Yonkers, New York

SPECIAL-NEEDS PROGRAMS

The judges honored these ten schools for their exceptional efforts to meet the needs of those with physical, emotional, or behavioral learning disabilities.

Vilonia Elementary, Vilonia, Arkansas
At rural Vilonia Elementary, one third of the pupils in some classes of the third to fifth grades are "differently abled," as the

school calls them. Everyone learns together thanks to teachers who are jointly certified in elementary and special education, and the fact that kids with disciplinary problems are paired with high school students who serve as role models. Physically or mentally limited pupils work with gifted fifth graders during science activities. "Our goal is to get all students to accept that everyone has a problem of some sort," says principal Ed Bradshaw, who reports that improved self-esteem among all students is the result.

Elementary School	City/State
Educational Program for the Individual Child	Birmingham, Alabama
Vilonia	Vilonia, Arkansas
Linda Vista	San Diego, California
John Quincy Adams	District of Columbia
Ala Wai	Honolulu, Hawaii

Elementary School	City/State
Hartman	Omaha, Nebraska
Sarah Collins	Greenville, South Carolina
Beacon Heights	Salt Lake City, Utah
Gilbert Linkous	Blacksburg, Virginia
Emily Dickinson	Redmond, Washington

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Unlike schools that lock their doors after classes, the five winners in this category excel in offering challenging and mind-expanding activities to enrich students' lives.

Vaughn Road Elementary School, Montgomery, Alabama
For many kids in the Montgomery area, the biggest draw in town for sheer fun isn't the local mall or video arcade. It's Vaughn Road Elementary School's activities program. Once a month, the school's 629 students skip their routine in favor of taking courses in everything from bowling and cake

decorating to oceanography and jazz dance. Like free universities, the 42 course offerings are taught by parents, teachers, and business leaders (and funded by a \$6,000 grant from a local councilman).

Elementary School	City/State
Vaughn Road	Montgomery, Alabama
Eccleston	Orlando, Florida
Frederick Funston Elementary	Chicago, Illinois
Alpine School	Sparta, New Jersey
John B. Dey Elementary	Virginia Beach, Virginia

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